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Daily Prayers for Unbelievers

Khushwant Singh

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Extracted from The Freethinker's Prayer Book by Khushwant Singh

• *Introduction* •

People who have religion seem to derive comfort from the belief that they will meet their Maker after they die, or that they will be reborn in some form. The more self-righteous among them are convinced that they will ascend straight to heaven. As an agnostic, I have no such comfort.

So be it. I have no regrets...

The most endearing attempt to make a believer of me was made by a little girl some twenty-five years ago. I had written an article in *The Indian Express* spelling out my views on God and religion. Soon after, I received a letter from Supriya, the twelve-year-old daughter of the then editor of the paper, Rajmohan Gandhi. 'Dear Uncle,' she wrote, 'I read your article in Daddy's paper. So you don't believe in God? You are wrong! Let me tell you, God exists. He visits our garden every day. He talks to my Mummy and

my Daddy. He also talks to me and my little brother. So there!’ I was charmed and wrote back: ‘Dear Supriya, I am glad to hear that God visits your garden every day. And that He talks to your Mummy, Daddy, you and your brother. But He does not talk to me. Please send me His telephone number.’ Supriya did not reply. Three years later I met her parents in Delhi. They told me ruefully, ‘Supriya no longer believes in God.’ I was delighted that I had won a convert in the great-grandchild of two great believers in God, Mahatma Gandhi and C. Rajagopalachari.

Many people have argued with me about the existence of God, trying to prove me wrong. I have always responded with simple logic: there is not a shred of credible evidence to support what they say. Despite the occasional claims by mystics, the truth is that no one has seen God. No one has been able to define God besides investing him with innumerable fantastic attributes: He is the creator, preserver and destroyer; benevolent and helpful; wrathful as well as just. He is everything and he is also, as the Upanishads say, *neti, neti*—not this, not this. The truth is that no one has a clue. It is more honest to admit that we don’t know, rather than accept fairy tales about God having created the world in six days or in the blink of an eye.

The Voltarian argument that if there is a watch there must then be a watchmaker has never made sense to me. I have met a few watchmakers, I have never met God. If God created the universe, who created God? If an all-powerful, all-seeing God does exist, why is there injustice and suffering in the world? Even those who believe in God have little justification for describing Him as omnipotent and just. Whatever evidence we have is to the contrary. Some children are born with severe physical and mental disabilities; God-fearing parents who never harmed anyone in their lives are punished by the loss of their innocent children; the gentlest people suffer terribly while thieves and murderers prosper. I cannot accept a God who is selective in granting his grace, or who is blind. And a ‘Mighty Avenger’ who must be constantly appeased is no God at all.

Even as a concept, God fails. Belief in God has little bearing on making a person good or bad. In our country alone, for every Mother Teresa and Baba Amte, there are thousands who have killed and raped in the name of their gods, as was done during Partition on both sides of the border, in Delhi in 1984 and in Gujarat in 2002. The masterminds of the 1984 and 2002 pogroms are ministers and party leaders. Neither the law nor God has made them pay

for their crimes.



Rejecting the idea of God and giving up on the basics of religion was not easy. It required searching within myself and questioning beliefs on which I had been nurtured. And once I had done it, how would I fill the vacuum? How could one explain the universe, life on earth and the laws of nature? Reason and logic helped me demolish much that I had been brought up on, but they did not give me all the answers I was looking for. So began the quest for a personal religion. Iqbal echoed my sentiments:

*Dhoondta phirta hoon main, ai Iqbal, apney aap ko
Aap hi goya musaafir, aap hi manzil hoon main.*

(O Iqbal, I go about everywhere looking for myself As if I was the wayfarer as well as the destination.)

Over some years, I came up with a religion of my own. It had very simple rules: ahimsa—non-violence—above all; work as worship; honesty (even about one's dishonesties); helping people in need; silent charity; and respecting and preserving the natural world. I may have failed to live by these rules sometimes, but I have tried to do so to the best of my ability.

My role models have never been the pious who contemplate God and the Universe in the seclusion of caves or by the banks of holy rivers. Rather, they are people who work among the poor and the handicapped. Mother Teresa, Bhagat Puran Singh, Ela Bhatt and Baba Amte are worth more than a hundred Shankaracharyas, Chinmayanandas and other godmen put together. They are our true saints, not those who merely pray and meditate or give long sermons to the gullible. I do not dismiss prayer altogether—one does not have to believe in God to concede that prayer has power. But all that it does is comfort the person saying the prayer. To change the world, you need to get out of your temples and do some useful work. I am more than ready to respect any baba, sant or maulvi if he joins the man breaking stones to build a road.

All my life I have also believed that since we have only one life to live, it

is our duty to live well and be happy. Renunciation does not impress me. It is self-righteous and anti-life—as Rumi said, ‘People who renounce desire turn suddenly into hypocrites.’ For all its imperfections, life is a great gift, and I have tried to get as much out of it as I could. I have feasted my eyes and senses on all that is beautiful in the world: its mountains and lakes, seashores and deserts; the break of the monsoon and the scent of wet earth; good food from all parts of the world, vintage wines and the finest Scotch whiskey; western classical music and shabad-kirtan; the fragrance of flowers and herbs and the shade of mighty trees; birdsong at the break of dawn; classic literature; and beautiful, spirited women, preferably with the gift of gossip. To quote the English poet and journalist, Arthur St. John Adcock:

*Come, let us go a-roaming!
The world is all our own,
And half its paths are still untrod,
And half its joys unknown.*

I would sum up my faith in a time-worn cliché: a good life is the only religion. A life of giving happiness and also finding it for oneself. There are better words to say it, for which I turn to the nineteenth-century American political leader and orator Robert G. Ingersoll: ‘Happiness is the only good; the place to be happy is here; the time to be happy is now; the way to be happy is to help others.’ And to Bertrand Russell, who, having rejected religion, came up with his own rules for life: ‘I believe in using words, not fists. I believe in honesty. I believe in a good time. I believe in good food. I believe in sex.’

My personal religion set me free long ago. I am no respecter of any single faith in its totality. I pick and choose as I please. All religions were creatures of their times and evolved to meet prevailing social and economic needs. To describe them as eternal truths for all time to come is sheer bunkum. But alongside all that is irrational, absurd and dangerous in every religion, there is also some good sense and nobility. It is the same with prophets and saints, as it is with philosophers, scientists and political leaders.

Once you have decided not to bow to any gods, and if you have a good bullshit detector, it is possible to separate the sublime from the ridiculous and derive inspiration from the words of prophets and poets, gurus and rogues, grave men and clowns. There is a lot to be learned from both the sacred and

the profane. I have done that nearly all my life and put down in my notebooks hundreds of lines from different sources that appealed to me. Sometimes I ask the more interesting people who come to visit me to write their favourite aphorisms and quotes in a diary I keep especially for this purpose. The best of these have been collected in the pages that follow. They are not all prayers; there are also precepts, advice, snatches of song and verse, and some words to live by. I offer them to you as life codes from an ancient and unrepentant agnostic. Read them with an open mind and an open heart.

*It seems appropriate to my agnostic mind to start this prayer book with the most audacious challenge ever posed to believers. Here are the concluding lines of the Nasadiya Sukta, the Creation Hymn, from the **Rig Veda**, arguably the world's most ancient sacred text. This version is adapted from translations by Wendy Doniger and A.L. Basham:*

Who knows, then, where everything arose?
Who can say how Creation happened?
The gods themselves came after Creation.

Then He, whether He created all that is or whether
He did not;
He, who looks upon everything from the highest heaven—
He alone knows. Or maybe He too does not.

If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar:
For he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, cannot love God whom
he hath not seen.

~The Bible

O people! We created you from the same male and female [but] made you into [separate] nations and tribes so that you may know and honour each other, and in the eyes of God the most honourable among you is the most righteous.

For God is all-knowing.

~The Quran

There is One God.
He is the Supreme Truth.
He, the Creator,
Is without fear and without hate.
He, the Omnipresent,
Pervades the universe.

~Opening lines of the Guru Granth Sahib

Let us live happily, then, not hating those who hate us.
Among men who hate us, let us dwell free from hatred.

~The Dhammapada

All the Arihants [the enlightened ones] of all times proclaim this:
Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture or kill any living being.

That which you destroy or think of destroying is (like) yourself.
That which you subjugate or think of subjugating is (like) yourself.
That which you kill or think of killing is (like) yourself.

~The Akaranga Sutra,
one of the oldest religious texts of the Jains

We revere Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds done and to be done,
now and henceforth.

And we, therefore, praise and invoke all that is Good.

~The Avesta

He said to them: 'What should a man seek for himself?'

Rabbi Eliezer said, 'A good eye.'

Rabbi Yehoshua said, 'A good friend.'

Rabbi Yose said, 'A good neighbour.'

Rabbi Shimon said, 'The ability to see the consequences.'

Rabbi Elazar said, 'A good heart.'

And he said to them: 'I prefer the words of Rabbi Elazar, because his words
include the words of all the rest.'

~'Ethics of the Fathers', The Talmud

Blessed are the merciful:

for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart:

for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers:

for they shall be called the children of God.

~The Bible

Give birth to and nourish all things, without desiring to possess them.

Give of yourself, without expecting something in return.
Assist people, but do not attempt to control them.
This is how you realize the deep virtue of the Universe.

~Tao Teh Ching
{translation by Hua-Ching Ni}

O you beloved of the Lord! Commit not that which defiles the limpid stream
of love or destroys the sweet fragrance of friendship. By the righteousness of
the Lord!

You were created to show love one to another and not perversity and rancour.
Take pride not in love for yourselves but in love for your fellow creatures.
Glory not in love for your country, but in love for all mankind . . .
Set your reliance on the army of justice, put on the armour of wisdom, let
your adorning be forgiveness and mercy.

~Tablet of Wisdom, Bahá'u'lláh

There are five prayers,
Each with a time and name of its own.
First, truthfulness.
Second, to take only what is your due.
Third, goodwill towards all.
Fourth, pure intentions;
And praise of God, the fifth.

~The Guru Granth Sahib

Lead us from untruth to Truth,
Lead us from darkness to Light,
Lead us from death to Eternity.

[Let there be] Peace. Peace. Peace.

~ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

The glory of the man of wisdom is also the glory of the man of good action.
That man sees the Truth, who sees that thought and action are one.

~*The Bhagavad Gita*

Be a lamp unto yourself.
Be a refuge to yourself.
Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp.
Hold fast to the Truth as a refuge.
Look not for refuge outside yourself.

~*Maha Parinibbana Sutta*,
based on the last days of the Buddha

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even
against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be against rich
or poor, for God can best protect both.

Follow not the cravings of your hearts, lest you swerve, and if you distort
justice or decline to do justice, truly God is well acquainted with all that you
do.

~*The Quran*
{translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali}

Do not mock anyone.

Do not be over-zealous in punishing others.
Do not strike others.
Do not tell a lie to anyone.
Do not deceive anyone lest you come to grief thereby.
Do not destroy your own soul through anger or vengeance.

*~Counsels of Adarbad Mahraspandan,
a sacred text of the Zoroastrians*

Conquer the untruthful man with truthfulness;
Subdue the angry man with gentleness;
Overcome the evil man with goodness.

~The Mahabharata

Overcome anger with kindness,
And evil with good.
Overcome meanness with a gift,
And a liar with truth.

~The Dhammapada

The true yogi meditates, realizing . . . I am a stranger to this world, there is no
one with me!

Just as the spume and the waves are born of the ocean then melt back into it,
So the world is born of me and melts back into me.

~Yoga Darshana Upanishad
{translation by Jean Varenne and Derek Coltman}

Learn to let go.

~Isha Upanishad



*The Sikh Guru Arjun Dev, in **Shabad Hazare**, had this advice for those who want to practise asceticism:*

Let your own house be the forest,
Your heart the anchorite.
Eat little, sleep little,
Learn to love, be merciful, and forbear.
Be mild, be patient,
Have no lust, nor wrath,
Greed, nor obstinacy.

Do not turn your face away from your fellow men,
And do not walk in insolence upon the earth.
For God does not favour the arrogant.

~The Quran

{translation by Zia Hashmi}

He whose mind is free from anxiety in the face of suffering, who is indifferent to pleasure as to pain, who is beyond passion, fear, anger and hate — he alone is the most excellent sage.

~The Bhagavad Gita

Not about the perversities of others,
not about their sins of commission

nor their sins of omission,
but about his own misdeeds and negligences alone
should a sage be worried.

~The Dhammapada
{translation by Paul Carus}

Sweet blow the winds.
Sweet flow the rivers.
May the herbs be sweet to us.
May the night and days bring happiness.
May the dust of the Earth yield us happiness.
May Heaven, our Father, send us happiness.
May the trees gladden us with fruit.
May the Sun bestow joy on us.
May every direction bring us happiness.

~The Rig Veda
{translation by Renuka Narayanan}

And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into
pruning hooks:
nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any
more.

~The Bible

A good soldier is not violent.
A good fighter is not angry.

~Tao Teh Ching

Feeble or strong, short or tall,
small or large, seen or unseen;
near-dwelling or distant,
born and present in this world or yet to be born:
May all beings, without exception,
Be happy minded.
~ *Karaniya Metta Sutta*

Unto heaven be peace, unto the sky be peace,
Unto the earth, water, herbs, plants and trees be peace.
Unto the gods be peace, unto the Creator be peace,
Unto everyone be peace, and peace unto me.
~*The Yajur Veda*
{translation by Renuka Narayanan}

Indeed, Ahura Mazda, the Wise God, knows the people of righteousness:
They who serve the living world in which we all live.
And we, on our part, venerate all such men and women.
~*The Zoroastrian Gathas*

Who is honoured?
He who honours mankind.
~‘Ethics of the Fathers’, The Talmud

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul,

and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first
commandment.

And the second is like, namely this,
Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.
There is none other commandment greater than these.

~The Bible



*The remarkable concept of Vasudhaivakutumbakam (the world is
our family) appears in this shloka from the **Maha Upanishad**:*

Only the small of heart think:
‘These are my people, and those strangers.’
For the magnanimous sage,
All the world is family.

In making a gift we overcome greed, which is a form of himsa (violence).
Hence gifts made to those in need amount to a renunciation of himsa (and
observance of ahimsa).

~Purusharthasiddhi-upaya,
a Jain sacred text

Charity given without expectation of anything in return,
At the appropriate and auspicious time and place,
And given as a duty to those deserving—
Such charity is true goodness.

~The Bhagavad Gita

A kind word followed by magnanimity is better than charity followed by
rudeness . . .

O believers, nullify not your alms-giving by demanding gratitude or causing
offence, like one who spends his wealth in order to flaunt it before people and
believes neither in God nor in the Last Day.

~*The Quran*
{translation by Tarif Khalidi}

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I
am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.
And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all
knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains,
and have not charity, I am nothing.
And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my
body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

~*The Bible*

As a team of oxen are we driven
By the ploughman, our Teacher.
By the furrows made are thus writ
Our actions—on earth, our paper.
The sweat of labour is as beads
Falling, by the ploughman as seeds sown:
We reap according to our measure,
Some for ourselves to keep, some to others give.
O Nanak, this is the way to truly live.

~*The Guru Granth Sahib*

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.
Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

~The Bible

The deva said:
What is the greatest gain?
What is the greatest loss?
Which armour is invulnerable?
What is the best weapon?
The Blessed One replied:
The greatest gain is to give to others;
The greatest loss is to greedily receive without gratitude;
An invulnerable armour is patience;
The best weapon is wisdom.

~The Gospel of the Buddha
{compiled from Buddhist texts and translated by Paul Carus}

Non-violence in thought, word and deed.
To seek and speak the truth.
To behave honestly and never to take anything by force or theft.
To practise restraint and chastity in thought, word and deed.
To practice non-acquisitiveness.

~The five vratas (vows) in the Jain code of conduct

You will never come to piety unless you spend of things you love; and

whatever you spend is known to God.

~*The Quran*
{translation by Ahmed Ali}

The dharma one achieves by doing no violence to any being, greater than that there is no dharma. Who causes in others neither disquiet nor agitation, he becomes free himself from fear.

~*The Mahabharata*
{translation by Chaturvedi Badrinath}

People of the Book
do not go to excess
in your religion.

~*The Quran*
{translation by Thomas Cleary}

Religion is not his who too much fasts
Or too much feasts, nor his who sleeps away
An idle mind; nor his who wears to waste
His strength in vigils. Nay, Arjuna! I call
That the true piety which most removes
Earth-aches and ills, where one is moderate
In eating and in resting, and in sport;
Measured in wish and act; sleeping betimes,
Waking betimes for duty.

~*The Bhagavad Gita*
{translation by Edwin Arnold}

What use is bending or bowing of head
When you bow not the heart?

~The Guru Granth Sahib

[The ignorant] seek comfort in mighty words;
Clever talking will not bring salvation.

~ *Uttaradhyayana*,
a text of the Jain canon

What seek you in pilgrimage to sacred rivers?
The priceless jewel is within your breast.
The learned Pundit reads much, declaims much But knows not the treasure
within himself.

~*The Guru Granth Sahib*

There shall be no compulsion in the matter of faith.
Distinct is the way of guidance now from error.
He who turns from the forces of evil and believes in God, will surely hold
fast to a handle that is strong and unbreakable, for God hears all and knows
everything.

~*The Quran*

By self alone is evil done,
By self is one disgraced;
By self is evil left undone,

By self alone is one purified;
Purity and impurity belong to self:
No one can purify another.

~*The Dhammapada*
{translation by A.J. Edmunds}

The knot of the heart is cut away,
Doubts vanish and struggles cease,
When That, the Truth, is seen.

~The Mundaka Upanishad
{translation by Renuka Narayanan}

Not by refraining from action does man attain freedom from [the
consequences of] action. Not through mere renunciation does he attain
supreme perfection.

~*The Bhagavad Gita*

Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of
judgement: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love;
but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment.

He that feareth is not made perfect in love.

~*The Bible*

In the name of Allah, most benevolent, ever-merciful.

Say: ‘O you unbelievers,
I do not worship what you worship

Nor do you worship who I worship
Nor will I worship who you worship
Nor will you worship who I worship.
To you your way, to me my way.'

~The Quran
{translation by Ahmed Ali}

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

~The Bible

Extracted from *The Freethinker's Prayer Book* by Khushwant
Singh

In this eclectic and deeply personal collection, India's grand old man of letters brings together precepts, prayers and practical advice by prophets, poets and philosophers, and his favourite passages from the seminal texts of the world's major faiths. The Bible and the Granth Sahib speak to us from these pages, as do the Quran and the Vedas. The songs of mystics and saints like Kabir, Rumi and Teresa of Avila mix with the verse of poets like Ghalib, Tagore and Keats. In the final section, Khushwant Singh shares some of his own life codes and those of the rebels and mavericks he most admires.

Full of spirit, wit and good sense and as free of humbug as the man himself this is a book of inspiration, comfort and entertainment for every discerning reader.